

Lithuanian Leader, on 'Private' Visit, to Meet Bush

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, May 1 — President Bush will meet with the Lithuanian Prime Minister on Thursday, the White House announced today. It will be the first time that an American President has met with a leader of the Baltic republic since it was forcibly annexed by the Soviet Union in 1940.

By the Administration's account, the meeting with Prime Minister Kazimiera Prunskiene will also be the first direct contact between Mr. Bush and any Lithuanian official since Lithuania declared independence from Moscow on March 11.

The White House, clearly aware of the diplomatic conundrum posed by the meeting, went out of its way today to portray Mrs. Prunskiene's visit to Washington and the White House talks as a private affair that did not signal a change in United States policy on Lithuania.

Bush Decision Criticized

The announcement of the planned meeting came as Congress sharpened its criticism of Mr. Bush's decision last week not to retaliate for the Kremlin's economic sanctions against Lithuania.

Secretary of State James A. Baker 3d became embroiled in a testy exchange with several prominent Senators during a committee hearing, and the full Senate voted 73 to 24 for a non-binding resolution urging Mr. Bush not to submit legislation to increase trade with the Soviet Union unless Moscow lifts its trade sanctions and begins negotiating with the republic's elected leaders.

Trying to walk a thin line between refusal to recognize the incorporation of Lithuania into the Soviet Union and support for President Mikhail S. Gorbachev, the Bush Administration has not recognized the current government of Lithuania as the government of an independent nation.

The White House has avoided direct contacts with Lithuanian officials during the crisis; Mr. Bush has not even responded to a letter from President Vytautas Landsbergis.

Mrs. Prunskiene has been quoted in news reports from Vilnius as saying that she was initially denied permission to visit Washington before the summit meeting between Mr. Bush and Mr. Gorbachev, scheduled for May 30 to June 3.

But Marlin Fitzwater, the White House spokesman, said today that Mrs. Prunskiene was never denied a visa and sought to portray Mr. Bush's invitation to meet her in the White House as a routine decision without any greater policy implications.

Mr. Fitzwater said: "The President feels that it's important to get an au-

The White House walks a thin line on Baltic independence.

thoritative readout and description of events in Lithuania, hear first hand from her what is occurring there. And so she is in this country, and he thinks it's an important opportunity to hear her views."

Reaction in Lithuania

The Reuters news agency quoted a spokesman for the Parliament in Vilnius as saying the meeting was a positive sign. After Mr. Bush declined to retaliate against Moscow for cutting off shipments of oil and natural gas to Lithuania, President Landsbergis said

Mr. Bush had sold out Lithuania in a manner reminiscent of the appeasement of Hitler.

"At least this shows Bush has not taken his comments too personally," the spokesman, Edward Tuskenis, was quoted as saying.

Even with Mr. Fitzwater's careful formulation, the meeting posed some subtle diplomatic problems, since the point was to avoid any suggestion that the meeting was a tacit recognition of an independent Lithuania.

Mr. Fitzwater was asked, for example, if Mr. Bush was meeting with Mrs. Prunskiene as a private citizen, or as the Prime Minister of Lithuania.

'A Private Visit'

"He is meeting with her as an acknowledged and freely elected representative of the Lithuanian people," Mr. Fitzwater said. "She is here on a private visit, as we've said."

Mr. Fitzwater said Mr. Bush "is not meeting with her as Prime Minister of an independent Lithuania. Just so there is no confusion."

But what, Mr. Fitzwater was asked, will Mr. Bush call Mrs. Prunskiene? "Prime Minister, I suppose," Mr. Fitzwater said.

Asked how that fit in with the Administration's position on Lithuania's independence, he said the "title she carries is Prime Minister."

"We'll be glad to call her that title," he said. "We do not recognize Lithuania and there's nothing changed about that."

Message to the Kremlin

During a Senate hearing today, Senator Dennis DeConcini, Democrat of Arizona, told Mr. Baker that Mr. Bush's decision not to retaliate for the Kremlin's economic sanctions sent this message to the republic's leaders: "Oh gosh, yeah, we want you free and we want to help, but you know, we're not

going to do anything to upset Mr. Gorbachev."

Mr. Baker listened with evident irritation and replied, "I think that the President, frankly, Senator DeConcini, is in a better position to judge what might or might not be effective for the long run."

"I realize you guys are the masters here," the Senator said, "and I'm just a little munchkin working around here,

Washington is striving to avoid provoking Moscow.

trying to express a view." But, he added, "it seems to me that we're talking and that's all we're doing."

Mr. Baker said, "We have a lot of interests at stake here that are very important interests to the United States of America. One of these interests is to see the Soviets destroy 40,000 tanks as a part of a conventional forces agreement, and we want to lock that agreement in."

"Another is to see them destroy 50 percent of their heavy strategic missiles which are targeted on United States cities. We want to see that agreement locked in. We want to see a continued approach by the Soviet Union that will permit us to hopefully bring freedom and democracy to other areas of the world."

Mr. Baker said the Administration had to "balance" those concerns with pressure to push Mr. Gorbachev to allow Lithuania to secede. "This is the way we see it for the time being," he said.